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ABSTRACT

Students should become acquainted with gender communication differences in basic communication courses so that they can more effectively deal with each other. Very few business communication textbooks acknowledge that gender sensitivity is an important criterion. Also, instructors unintentionally ignore or trivialize the issue of gender sensitivity. Most instructors value modeling as a method for subtly teaching new concepts and behaviors to students. Instructors should take the time at the beginning of the semester to explain their policy on gender sensitive behavior as it applies within the confines of the classroom. Guests of both sexes can be invited to visit the classroom and relate their experiences. Students could be asked to write "mini papers" based on interviews with members of corporations. Readings for the course should contain literature that discusses gender communication. Role-playing situations (such as job interviews, group decision making processes, and "audience adaptation") benefit students by reinforcing the instructor's lecture as well as classroom discussion. Class activities ("supportive speeches," self-analyses of career goals, and "powerful" versus "powerless" language) may also be useful. Faculty training (panel discussions, faculty observation, and informal faculty discussions) are needed to make faculty aware of the need for changes in classroom climate and the material itself. (Contains 16 references.) (RS)

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INTRODUCING GENDER COMMUNICATION INTO THE BASIC BUSINESS COMMUNICATION COURSE

A PAPER PRESENTED AT THE 1993 SPEECH COMMUNICATION ASSOCIATION CONVENTION
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INTRODUCTION

In recent years there has been much focus on gender communication differences within our discipline. However, this focus is generally the domain of such specialized communication courses as interpersonal or gender studies and does not generally take place in a student's academic career unless the student elects to take such a course. This paper asserts that students should become acquainted with gender communication differences so that they can more effectively deal with each other. One way to ensure exposure to gender sensitivity is to introduce it to students enrolled in basic speech courses who might not otherwise receive such exposure. This paper will support this assertion by showing research that highlights the need for making students aware of the differences that exist between the genders in terms of their communication patterns. It will also suggest some methods for teaching gender communication skills in one of the basic speech courses, business and professional speech. There is no denying the importance of this topic to the thousands of young men and women who must not only be "rhetorically sensitive" in the traditional sense, but also must be able to use effective communication strategies that have previously been discarded as unimportant in the business world. Changes that have taken place over the last thirty years have altered the profile of the work force, which, according to the US Bureau of the Census, is now comprised of 45% women. It is illogical to assume that nearly half of the work force will adhere only to a set of rules that does not apply to their thought processes or their methods of social operation. Joseph F. McKenna points out in his article, "From High Tech to High Touch," that many

professionals are found lacking in the communicative skills traditionally associated with feminine communicative behavior, but which have been discovered to be very important in the workplace. He states that one reason for this lack is that these skills were neglected in the classroom (40). Indeed, the rules and roles in the business world are changing quickly and it behooves students to be aware of these changes so that they can become more salable in an increasingly competitive job market.

RATIONALE

When one observes the current business communication textbooks one can see that though most offer fairly broad sections on business conduct, very few acknowledge that gender sensitivity is an important criterion when considering this. Eric E. Peterson reports, "Only nine out of fifty-five introductory textbooks published in the first half of the 1980s even mention sexist language. In addition, reports on the status of basic speech communication courses do not mention gender or women's communication patterns as topics receiving attention" (61-62). As Julia T. Wood and Lisa Firing Lenze point out in their article "Strategies To Enhance Gender Sensitivity In Communication Education," there has been much criticism of textbooks for overlooking the communicative concerns of women. For example, many business communication texts focus on typically "male" oriented topics such as decision making and how to achieve power in business situations, while neglecting topics such as demonstrating interest in other's needs and establishing a warm working environment (16). It has become necessary for publishers to inject

information about gender sensitivity into the content of their textbooks. It must be noted that this "injection" should not be specifically "feminine." Rather it's goal is to take the communicative styles of both sexes into consideration. Sheryl Pearson, in her article "Rhetoric and Organizational Change: New Applications of Feminine Style," suggests that an "alternate rhetoric" needs to take place within the corporate hierarchy, one that values co-orientation rather than dominance. She states that this new form of discourse "...is not off limits to men any more than it is inherently feminine" (60). If such an "alternate rhetoric" will be appearing in the corporate communities of the United States, then it becomes important that textbooks respond to this so that the new generation of business people may be able to understand and apply it when they arrive on the job scene.

Textbooks are not the only component of speech communication education neglecting the gender issue. Too often, the instructor unintentionally ignores or trivializes the issue of gender sensitivity. As Wood and Lenze assert, "Repeated, often unconscious instances of gender insensitivity may involve content-what is taught-and/or process-how it is taught." They define a "gender insensitive" learning environment as one that "emphasizes, neglects, devalues or misrepresents experiences, concerns, and/or prespectives (sic) typically associated with one sex" (16). Peterson calls this type of environment "institutionalized violence of academic discourse and traditions" (60). In his article he quotes A. Wilden, who states that "The failure to interrogate race and gender in the classroom does not guarantee neutrality or objectivity" (60). providing support for Wilden's statement is P. Rothenberg, who claims. "...such a

'business as usual' approach guarantees that racism and sexism will be strengthened and perpetuated instead of eradicated" (60).

It is vital that students are made more aware of gender sensitivity in the classroom because many corporate training programs don't include this type of training in their employee initiation. A survey of ten large midwest corporations that represent all sectors of industry from retail to manufacturing revealed that although each corporation included training on sexual harassment laws, only one company out of the ten selected dealt with issues of gender communication and sensitivity in their employee orientation programs. One personnel supervisor, Darcy Karlen of Gilbert Robinson Inc., expressed his wish that new employees were made aware of the communication differences that exist between the sexes because he felt that new employees, especially young people, don't always understand the ramifications of their words and actions. Many corporations hire consultants to recommend methods of dealing with communication concerns and to present their recommendations to the employees. However, gender sensitivity is an issue seldom discussed. This is frustrating for many consultants who realize the value of changing the way corporations think about gender communication. Samuel Cox, Ph.D. is one such consultant. He maintains that though many corporations want to focus on interpersonal communication competence, most fall short when it comes to discussion of gender communication skills. Cox and consultants like him are armed with the materials needed to educate employees, however corporate budgets and other factors keep this topic from receiving the attention that it deserves. Another consultant, Pat Heim, feels that the biggest reason many companies don't give gender communication much attention is because "the powers that

be" of most companies are men who have been socialized by years in the corporate world to use forms of communication which tend to emphasize masculine communicative patterns. As a result, they can't really imagine what gender awareness training is because for many of them, the need for such training is out of their realm of experience. She stated that one such company finally called for her services after many of their "high power" female employees moved to other companies. They knew something was wrong, but were at a loss to diagnose the exact malady. Arlene La Bella, who also helps corporations with communication problems, asserts that even though the frame of the workforce has been based on male culture, "feminine" communication traits such as listening and providing empathetic feedback are becoming increasingly valuable as business objectives become more customer service oriented. All three consultants agree that most of corporate America remains ignorant insofar as gender communication skills are concerned. The research indicates that though the need for gender sensitivity training in terms of business communication exists, there are few programs, academic or corporate, that currently address this issue. As communication educators we have the task of instilling our students with a sense of rhetorical responsibility in many areas, one of which is knowledge of how to effectively and respectfully communicate in a business environment that includes both women and men. The balance of this paper will focus on methods that college educators can use to more effectively teach this concept.

METHODS

When incorporating gender sensitivity into a basic course such as business communication, it may be tempting for some instructors to inundate the class with everything they know about gender sensitivity. However, it is important for them to remember that the focus is on business communication and that it could be detrimental to overwhelm the students with this new awareness.

A. Modeling Most instructors value modeling as a method for subtly teaching new concepts and behaviors to students. Wood and Lenze point out that for many years the modeling that occurred in the classroom tended "...to favor men's ways of thinking and learning and to disconfirm women's ways" (16). They suggest that the instructor begin to confirm some of women's thought processes with their modeling (16). For example, if an instructor demonstrates a willingness to give all students a fair hearing, it will promote more traditionally "feminine" behaviors such as listening and cooperation. The instructor may want to encourage "masculine" communicative behaviors by touting the individual achievements of some of the class members and by encouraging competitive classroom exercises. As Wood and Lenze suggest, this not only encourages gender sensitive behavior, but strengthens basic business and social skills (17).

B. Classroom expectations lecture Even though instructors should keep the class focused on business communication, they should not avoid the issue of gender sensitivity altogether. It is important that at the beginning of the semester, while the rest of the ground rules are being presented, the instructor take the time to explain his/her policy on gender sensitive behavior as it applies within the confines of the classroom, as well as explain how it links to the type of behavior that will be expected of the students once they enter the business world. It may even be advisable to devote an entire class period toward an awareness of

gender sensitivity and communication. Barbara L. Baker Ph.D. suggests that the instructor avoid terminology specific to gender studies courses. Instead the instructor should "frame such a lecture in terms of dominant cultural systems," and include discussion of business communication as it relates to other groups that may need to be dealt with in a rhetorically sensitive manner. Publications that suggest alternative methods of communication may be given to the students. One such publication is A guide to Bias Free Communications. This provides a table of terms designed to help the student learn to communicate in a way that is respectful of all human differences. A discussion of the student's response to these new terms may be a barometer of the attitudes that each holds. Other material that can be examined in the lecture may be the human socialization processes that form the ways in which humans come to value their abilities, or how subtle biases influence the way humans think about themselves. This awareness will hopefully provide a base for a business communication course in which the students learn to be sensitive to communicative differences that exist between the sexes as well as those that exist between diverse cultures.

C. Experiential learning/case studies Clarke and Teddlie, in their article, "Communication Barriers of Managers," suggest two ideas that help introduce students to the business communication situation as it exists in the present day. The first is to invite guests of both sexes to visit the classroom and relate their experiences. They should be prepared to devote a portion of their lecture to the discussion of situations, both positive and negative, in which gender communication has played a part. This will provide interesting viewpoints of how things are "in the real world," as well as give students a change of pace from normal classroom

activities. Wood and Lenze point out that, "The role of 'outside expert' provides the speaker with special credibility to name issues and 'stir things up' in ways resident faculty may not prudently follow" (19). The second suggestion involves field reporting exercises. These can be structured as "mini papers" that require a simple interview with a member of a corporation. An interview may include questions that have been discussed in class. Some of these questions may deal with the member's perception of gender communication sensitivity within the company, or specific instances when the member may have felt violated or misunderstood. It would be valuable to have the students compose the questions so that they really consider their importance. Field exercises can be as extensive as the instructor wishes. Some instructors may even wish to use them as a semester research project, having students interview several members within the same corporation, or concentrating on one member by observing his/her daily business practices over an extended period of time. The student should report on the interview experience, describing such things as how interpersonally competent the businessperson was, what factors contributed to their personality, and the student's perception of the individual's self-concept. Again it must be stressed that business communication is the focus. Although gender communication considerations should be made, the entire field exercise should not exclude other components of business communication.

D. Readings The reading list for the course should contain literature that discusses among other things, gender communication. Pearson, Turner and Todd-Mancillas' Book Gender and Communication provides a study of gender within all communicative contexts, including a chapter that focuses on such business concerns as small group behaviors,

leadership behaviors, and communication in the business world. Deborah Tannen's best-selling book, You Just Don't understand provides interesting reading for the student. The focus of the book is on communicative patterns within the interpersonal speaking context, but much of the information can be applied to business communication. Outsiders On The Inside, edited by Barbara Forisha and Barbara Goldman is an excellent collection of scholarly articles that specifically address the communication problems that women experience in the work force. Instructors may wish to have each student prepare an oral presentation based on one or more of the readings. Included at the end of this paper is a bibliography that instructors may find helpful in terms of composing their own reading list.

E. Role playing As in most basic communication courses, role-playing is a useful method of building redundancy into the message of the lecture. Students don't often gain full impact from lectures alone, but by providing such activities as role-play the students will benefit from the reinforcement of the instructor's lecture as well as the classroom discussion that ensues after the role-play has taken place. The scenarios need to be carefully tailored to include other components of business communication rather than just gender sensitivity. They can be adapted to any unit that the class is studying at the time. These role-playing situations can be recorded so that the actors can see their own performance. This will also aid in class discussion because the performance can be "recalled" instantly Examples of such scenarios are as follows:

1) A job interview. The employer is using sexist language (generic pronouns, disparaging euphemisms, and "belittling" words.) The

employer is also asking illegal questions about the prospective employee's plans for marriage and parenthood. In addition to this, the employer will not center the interview on the applicant, instead he/she keeps talking about other matters. The "job applicant" must deal with the "employer's" behavior. After this role-playing situation the class discussion may include such considerations as whether or not it would have been prudent for the applicant to counter the offensive remarks, what sorts of sexist language was used in the interview, or tactics that might have been useful in terms of getting the employer back on task.

2) The group decision making process. Divide the class into groups of five to seven people and assign each group a task that requires them to solve a "corporate" problem. After each group solves the hypothetical business problem, encourage them to discuss which members of each group emerged as leaders. Did some people appear to take over while others remained quiet? Were typical problem solving strategies used? Did gender seem to be a correlate of the type of communication tactics that were used by the group's members? Was non-sexist language used?

3) Audience adaptation. Divide the students into groups of eight to ten people. Select a speaker and provide him/her with an unpopular "business proposal." The speaker must submit this "proposal" to a "hostile audience." Where will the speaker place the reservations? The refutations? The thesis statement? After the "proposal" has been made, the audience members must critique the speaker. Did he/she present the information in the correct place? Was the language used appropriate for the audience? Was it non-sexist? Would this "hostile audience" consider the proposal?

F. Activities

1. Eric Peterson provides a wonderful tool to use early in the semester. Though he describes it's utility in the basic speech course, it is highly appropriate for a class in business communication. Peterson calls this a "supportive speech"(64). In this type of speech the students are divided into small groups. They are required to support previous speakers in order to keep the conversation flowing. This type of assignment accomplishes two things. It helps students to become acquainted with each other and it demonstrates the value of the sort of collaboration that has been attributed to "feminine" conversational style.

2. Students can do a "self analysis" of career goals in which they specifically examine the communication skills that they would need to use in order to attain these goals, and which of these skills are gender related. An example could be as follows: If they want to be the CEO of a large corporation would they employ symmetrical communication patterns (typically female), or complementary communication patterns (typically male)? Would it be advantageous to choose one type of pattern over the other?

3.Craig E. Johnson suggests some activities designed to help students become aware of "powerful" versus "powerless" language (powerless language includes such things as hedges, tag questions and disfluencies), and to learn what impact their use has on an audience, as well as help the student know how to tailor their use of this type of language to fit each communication context(169). Discussion could include considerations such as identifying famous personalities who use powerful/powerless language. Does that personality use the language deliberately? What does the use of this language do for the personality's

credibility? Other topics for discussion could be ways that students could learn to use more powerful language, or situations in which the use of each type of language would be beneficial (171). Johnson also suggests the use of a demonstration tape so that students can actually see powerful and powerless language in action. He states that in his own classes students that have viewed these tapes have a much easier time identifying each type (170).

G. Faculty training Unless speech faculty are made aware of the need for changes in both the classroom climate as well as in the material itself, any suggestions for classroom activities will remain useless. No one can deny the importance of involving all faculty in the reworking of basic courses to include material which is gender sensitive. Wood and Lenze provide several activities with which the faculty may become involved.

1. Inviting a faculty member from a women's studies department to participate in a panel discussion that focuses on the types of instructor conduct that may discourage feminine communicative behavior in the classroom(19).

2. Faculty observation is another way to raise the consciousness of instructors with regard to gender sensitive behavior. Wood and Lenze suggest that the least threatening way to enact this is to have the instructor do a self-evaluation. This way the instructor can honestly and non-defensively evaluate his/her own attitude and concentrate on altering one or two behaviors at a time instead of trying to completely overhaul his/her entire system of behaviors. Some of the criteria a faculty member might monitor include the frequency with which he/she calls on female versus male students, or the level of questions posed to male students versus female students(20).

3. Informal faculty discussions in relaxed atmospheres (i.e. bag lunches on campus), are helpful for promoting non-defensive discussions on faculty changes that need to occur in terms of gender sensitivity issues (20).

CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper has been to justify the need for teaching gender communication skills in the business and professional speech course. Hopefully the evidence toward such an end compels the reader to adjust his/her teaching style to accommodate this need. It is also my hope that the methods provided to aid in this goal will prove useful to the instructor who sees value in the incorporation of gender communication into the business and professional speaking course. The task of changing a system that has so long been established may seem arduous, or even impossible. However, as educators we have a duty to prepare students to lead productive lives as well as to broaden their ways of experiencing the world. Acting as agents of change with regard to gender communication is one way in which we can execute this duty.

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